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SUBJECT: KIMBANGUISM: CONGOLESE HISTORY, IDENTITY AND
RELIGION

11. (U) Summary: The Kimbanguist Church is a large home-grown Congolese religion. Like most of the population, Kimbanguists consider themselves Christians, although they are not always seen as such by others. Church officials claim nearly one-sixth of the population follows Kimbanguism; it has a significant voice in Congolese society. Based on the teachings of Christianity, the religion was founded by a self-proclaimed Congolese prophet named Simon Kimbangu during the country's colonial era. Kimbangu and his movement quickly became an early symbol of Congo's independence drive and remain important pieces of the country's history and identity. Congolese politicians of all faiths publicly pay respects to Simon Kimbangu and have routinely sought the church's support. End summary.

WHAT IS KIMBANGUISM?

12. (U) Congolese Kimbanguist theologian Kalembe Manzo Constantino defined the religion as "Christianity deriving from the actions and teachings of Simon Kimbangu." The movement began when a self-styled prophet by the name of Simon Kimbangu claimed to be called by God and began preaching and healing on April 6, 1921. Kimbangu started his work in his home town of Nkamba, in western Bas-Congo province. Kimbanguists believe Simon Kimbangu is part of the Christian Trinity: the Holy Spirit in human form.

13. (U) Today Kimbanguist officials claim some 17 million followers worldwide, with 10 million alone in the DRC, including more than one million in Kinshasa. This would represent about one-sixth of the DRC's estimated population of 65 million. Other sources maintain Kimbanguists are no more than ten to fifteen percent of the population. Most of its adherents are located in Bas-Congo and Kinshasa, although there are numerous Kimbanguist churches throughout the country. Kimbanguist officials also told us they have followings in many other African countries, especially nearby Angola and the Republic of Congo.

AFRICAN HEROISM AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

14. (U) Church officials and followers say that during the colonial period, Belgian authorities were alarmed by Kimbangu's popularity and perceived his movement as a threat to the Catholic Church. In his preaching, Kimbangu embraced the emerging concept of an African identity and traditions, and was among the first Congolese public figures to protest Belgian rule. In response, colonial authorities imprisoned

him in 1921 and outlawed Kimbanguism. Kimbangu died in prison in 1951.

15. (U) Kimbangu was later recognized as an early independence hero by Mobutu Sese Seko, Laurent Kabila and Joseph Kabila. His resistance against Belgian colonial rule and support of Africanism made him an icon of black liberation thought, and Congolese political leaders today regularly pay respect to the Kimbanguist community and his memory. In his June 30 independence day address to the nation this year, Kabila paid tribute to "Simon Kimbangu's generation" for starting the fight for democracy. National Assembly Vice President Marc Mvuama, a practicing Catholic, told us that Kimbanguism is respected regardless of one's religious background because the religion is regarded as a home-grown response to colonialism that helped liberate the country. He added that the Protestant and Catholic churches are viewed by Congolese as remnants of western colonialism and thus not genuinely African.

16. (U) Kimbanguist officials reported that they were persecuted by colonial authorities but flourished in secret under the leadership of Simon Kimbangu, his wife Marie Muilu Kiawaga after his imprisonment. In 1959 Kimbangu's third son, Joseph Diangienda, became the movement's leader after it was officially recognized by the state as the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by his Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK). After Joseph Diangienda died in 1992, Simon Kimbangu's second son Salomon Dialungana Kiangani became the Kimbanguist spiritual leader. He was succeeded in 2001 by his son Simon Kiangani, who remains the church's spiritual leader to this day.

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17. (SBU) Congolese observers describe Kimbanguists as financially independent, well-organized, and community-minded. Kimbanguists themselves attribute these traits to years of colonial persecution when they had to be determined and self-sufficient to succeed. Even after the church was legalized in 1959, one Kimbanguist leader said its members were excluded from some educational and medical facilities still controlled by Belgians and subsequently decided to build their own. A Kimbanguist leader told us they have roughly 180 medical centers and over a thousand Kimbanguist schools open to the public around the country (611 primary schools and 540 secondary schools). The church also runs a Kimbanguist University with a theological campus outside Kinshasa that was built in 1977 and a general campus within the city built in 1994. In addition, they built the Hopital Kimbanguiste de Kinshasa with partial USAID funding. The Kimbanguist community's main edifices and sources of significant pride are the church's temple in Nkamba, the Kimbanguist equivalent of Vatican City, and a research center in Kinshasa open to the public.

18. (SBU) There has been speculation that the Kimbanguist church is linked with the group Bundu dia Kongo (BDK) because both groups have mystical elements, claim to follow Simon Kimbangu and are based in Bas-Congo. Kimbanguist officials disavowed any contact with the BDK however and said they considered it a political rather than a religious group.

POLITICAL CLOUT

19. (SBU) Given the movement's large number of followers, it represents an important bloc of votes for political candidates. Political and religious leaders told us there is often an informal alliance between the government and churches, including the Kimbanguists. Mvuama said churches often benefit from financial donations from politicians who in return receive unofficial support from religious leaders. He said this can mean encouraging followers to vote for certain candidates in private or endorsement political

campaign goals in public sermons.

¶10. (SBU) Kimbanguist leaders have never officially supported a political leader, but many Congolese interlocutors claim there has often been an alliance between the government and the Kimbanguist church regardless of who was president. Several Kimbanguist officials said there were especially close ties between Joseph Diangienda and Mobutu, who reportedly gave personal donations to the church and regularly attended Kimbanguist ceremonies. One Kimbanguist told us this relationship was "predestined by God" since the two were friends before rising to power, and because both had the first name "Joseph." Other Congolese contacts told us people threw rocks at Diangienda's funeral because many in the Congolese community resented the alliance with the unpopular dictator. Laurent Kabila likewise retained good relations with the Kimbanguist church and paid respect to the memory of Simon Kimbangu in public statements, but was less involved than Mobutu, according to church officials.

¶11. (SBU) Joseph Kabila is similarly regarded as an ally of the Kimbanguist church although there is no clear evidence most followers are active supporters. His daytrip to Nkamba in February 2002 and three day stay March 15-18, 2003 were fondly remembered and much-discussed in Kimbanguist circles who saw it as the ultimate sign of respect and friendship. Some contacts told us they knew of no political affiliation between Kabila and the church, though others said Kiangani unofficially ordered followers to vote for Kabila. One Kimbanguist leader described the relationship as "perfect," saying Kiangani and Kabila were in regular contact and that Kimbanguists voted for him "automatically" because of this relationship. Election results do not support this claim, however, as Kabila showed poorly in Bas-Congo and Kinshasa, areas which voted heavily in favor of Jean-Pierre Bemba. One Kimbanguist who has left the church said Kiangani was not able to deliver the vote as promised because of divisions within the church.

DIVISION IN THE CHURCH

¶12. (SBU) In October 2002, a dispute arose in the Kimbanguist
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church that resulted in at least 17 of the 26 of Simon Kimbangu's grandchildren leaving the official church with a minority of followers. The group's unofficial name is the Kimbangu Church "Bana 26" (meaning in support of the 26 grandchildren), though the name is used sparingly by its members to avoid cementing a division they hope to resolve. One Kimbanguist member of Bana 26 estimated one-fifth of the church left at the time of the split, but a mainstream Kimbanguist leader told us there were no more than 3,000 followers who left.

¶13. (SBU) Kimbanguist members gave diverse explanations for the division. The former General Secretary of the church cited the creation of "illegitimate church legislation," while a Bana 26 member said the group was waiting for Kiangani to step down because his "extremist followers" were incorrectly claiming that Kiangani was a reincarnation of Simon Kimbangu. A current Kimbanguist leader told us Kiangani was Simon Kimbangu's reincarnation but said the division was a result of the other grandchildren demanding overly important positions in the church. Kimbanguist leaders told us the division had attracted Kabila's attention, and one Kimbanguist leader said Bana 26 was trying to use him as a mediator.

WHO ARE KIMBANGUISTS?

¶14. (SBU) Kimbanguists generally lead austere lives and do

not dance, smoke, drink alcohol or practice polygamy. While the religion was originally based on Christianity and the Bible, members place great importance on prophecies and mystical signs, which they view as proof of God's manifestation in Simon Kimbangu's family. Kimbanguists told us they know about deaths and births of Simon Kimbangu's relatives in advance, and gave many examples of signs they said were proof of predestination by god. One practicing Kimbanguist told us that God revealed to followers in a vision that the true date of Christmas (and thus the birth of Jesus Christ) was May 25, which is also the birth date of Simon's second son Dialungana. Other major church celebrations commemorate important dates in Simon Kimbangu's family history: April 6 for the beginning of Simon Kimbangu's ministry; July 8 for Diagienda's death; and October 12 for the death of Simon Kimbangu and the birth of Kiangani.

¶15. (SBU) Although Kimbanguists consider themselves Christians they are not always considered Christians by Congolese outside the church, who often claimed Kimbanguists say Simon Kimbangu is either God the Father or Jesus Christ. Kimbanguists consider the Kimbangu family sacred, and always choose the movement's spiritual leader from among Simon Kimbangu's descendants. Kimbanguists told us spiritual leadership decisions were "divinely inspired," and one leader said they were in fact "prophesied" in advance. Most Kimbanguists know the family history by heart and keep pictures of Kimbangu and his descendants around the house.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) The Kimbanguist church is a unique and important part of the Congolese identity. It carries political prestige because its leaders were early advocates for national independence. Its historic importance, socially active role and large following continues to attract political leaders who seek its support while paying respect to the memory of Kimbangu. When we met with Kimbanguist leaders they seemed more interested in their religious devotion than mainstream politics. Their political activities are therefore more likely driven more by a desire to build harmonious relationships with political leaders who can provide material support to the church. While the church is a popular domestic and somewhat international religion, its domestic clout may be diminished if internal divisions cannot be reconciled.

MEECE